

# Social Considerations in Distance and Virtual Education

Christopher Rafferty  
David McCurdy  
Graeme Foster

Information Systems Section  
UCOL  
Palmerston North  
c.rafferty@UCOL.ac.nz

now aims to provide the key elements in the development of a customer-centric culture for education. The focus being online distances education.

## ABSTRACT

This concise paper outlines a research project, which aims to explore and contrast customer attitudes towards distance education and virtual learning. Emphasis is placed on the need to consider human perspectives in the development of future distance-education programmes.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of this paper originally was fostered as ethnographic study but has now evolved into a larger project. The original hypothesis of the project has been eradicated, however some of the findings have been utilised. The study has become a study of the customer-centric requirements of distance education. Many elements of customer focused delivery have been extracted from a number of sources. With this in mind the research

## 2. HISTORY

In general most educators develop on-line resources from a lecturing perspective or from the technology-perspective. Out of 18 staff interviewed in the past, most staff used the web as an extension for their filing system for their teaching materials. This focus is not utilising the web to its full potential as a teaching and learning environment. This study aims to provide the distance education designer with elements to develop a customer-centric solution, which is quite different from usual practices.

## 3. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

In most literature published in the area of online trading or electronic business: there are risks in adopting technologies for the sake of the technologies themselves. However, the literature also suggests there should be a greater emphasis on customer focused delivery in the form of differentiation through service, a differentiation strategy is given by Timmers (1999). The internet and online education makes this easy, by capturing and analysing customer demographics, the understanding and personal relationship to the customer can be self evident. Rosen (2000) provides a simple demographic analysis system for on-line solutions. Online education can be designed in such a way that the customer perceives one-to-one interaction, again perpetuating the one-to-one relationship. Additional, global digital communities can be built for increasing customer awareness and understanding,



Rosenoer *et al* (1999) describes some strategies and case-studies regarding the on-line corporation. Any distance education package should be customer-centric. In the cutthroat web-economy several business strategies can be adopted and enhanced, for a selection of successful strategies see Seybold (1998). Collections of critical success factors are also provided in that publication.

Brown (1997) describes many case studies from industry and education perspectives. However, all but one, are technocentric case studies. If distance and online education packages are built from a technocentric perspective several customer-related problems may arise. Examples of this manifests itself as technophobic behaviour that could be avoided with good electronic business design, see Bishop (1999). It is highly possible that in the future many on-line distance education packages will be available for students to select. The competition will be global: reliance on locality alone for student capture will no longer suffice. This again supports the fact that online solutions should be customer-centric and supported through differentiated service. For an introduction to the global digital economy, see Tapscott (1995).

When constructing customer-centric on-line distance-education solutions the correct customer demographics must be attained to render the correct solution: global marketing is the key, this is discussed in Bishop (1999). Bridgman *et al.* (1999) suggests that the Global Virtual University (GVU) be completely designed from the bottom-up. The GVU must be capable of transcending global boundaries; this complements the statements already made about global competition. In the global environment many problems exist in the accreditation of programmes, language, time zones and cultural differences. As well as legal issues. Already in the USA several "Cowboy" Universities have granted illegal and non-accredited academic qualifications. The comments in that paper regarding "Universities will be replaced", is believed to be incorrect, the way in which Universities and Polytechnics operate, will change: they will not be replaced. The Information Revolution will not replace all business with e-business: elements of modern business that are more useful on-line will be replaced, others will just be enhanced with digital adjunct or re-engineered processes with a digital enhancement. Likewise, some material may be more appropriately taught via traditional methods, a thorough investigation should be made into the appropriateness of the on-line tool for teaching and learning. Karamat & Petrova (1999) provide some appropriate uses of technology to support education: bulletin boards, video-conferencing, online reference

materials and courses, e-mail communications, work-group computing, and multimedia. More importantly, however, do our customers wish to learn on-line? If so, who? Young *et al.* (1999) has carried out a study: the study suggests that older students and female students prefer learning on-line. In that paper it was suggested that younger students and males required more discipline. No ethnic differences were uncovered.

Calcinai (1999) suggests that course design should be modular and linear to cope with time zones. The focus of this paper is on the teacher-centred on-line learning model: students as customers should be able to learn in a more dynamic and spatial manner. Advocating the use of asynchronous media as a key solution for time-zone constraints and the adaptation of these systems in the learning environment.

Primary concerns with virtual distance education state the isolation and lack of social activities as being major influence in student participation. This problem can be solved by fostering community, see Seybold (1998). In that publication the following steps are highlighted:

- ◆ Seduce customers into the fold
- ◆ Introduce customers with common interest
- ◆ Introduce and reinforce common terminology and values
- ◆ Let customers "strut their stuff"
- ◆ Encourage customers to become part of the "in-crowd"

Chakma *et al.* (1999) describes elements of visual and web design. In that paper it is stressed that clear and concise instructions regarding assessment should be contained within the on-line education product. Chakma *et al.* (1999), also points out that student motivation can be a problem in the distance education on-line environment: counter measures must be used to avoid this.

## 4. ELEMENTS

Elements for the development of an online distance education package design:

- ◆ Customer-focus
- ◆ Differentiation through service
- ◆ On-line success strategies
- ◆ On-line failure strategies
- ◆ Critical success factors
- ◆ Marketing and demographic analysis
- ◆ Future-proofing the solution
- ◆ Flexible learning
- ◆ Flexible assessment

It is suggested that a complete shift from traditional educational thought should be made to reap the benefits of an under-utilised resource for teaching, assessment and learning. Student as customer will allow providers the differentiation through service imperative in the cutthroat global economy of the future. It is suggested that a thorough study of success and failure stories be conducted to formulate the on-line campus strategic plan: before any construction beings on an online product.

## 5. APPLICATION

The findings of this research are to be utilised by a project manager for the development of an on-line distance education package, as well as other customer-service orientated procedures.

## 6. FUTURE WORK

The students of the yet-to-be-developed package will be questioned and a thorough ethnographic study will be made. Further recommendations, critical success factors and strategies will be extracted.

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